Equality of Opportunity and Freedom from Discrimination

MHR Connections

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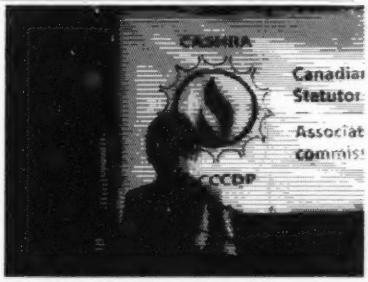
The passion of Dr. Samantha Nutt

In 1995, after studying international development and medicine, 25-year-old Samantha Nutt headed to Somalia, confident that she could make a difference. After 17 years the task is still daunting but during this time she has become one of Canada's most influential humanitarians.

The Canadian Association of Statutory Human Rights Agencies (CASHRA) Conference keynote speaker said when she heard that the title was "Are we there yet?" she thought it to be one of the most exciting themes she has yet to address. "Think of how many different meanings 'there' could have," she said. It could be a place, a time or goal. She spoke of the enormous strides made in the fight against racism, sexism and homophobia, but added that "there is a distinct difference between taking steps in the right direction and arriving at our destination."



Dr. Nutt, the Founder and Executive Director of War Child Canada, says the Canada Pension Plan, which we all pay into, has $200 million invested in almost two dozen arms makers.

During her 45 minute address she reminded everyone that 83% of Canadian wage earners making more the $230,000 are men, that less than 5% of CEO positions in the Fortune 500 Companies are women; that 70 % of the world poor are women; and that Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood has emphatically stated that women cannot become president in Egypt.

Dr. Nutt went back to her own beginnings and explained how she discovered the relationship between health and human rights. When she was 24 years old a UNICEF trip to Somolia changed her professional career. The young medical doctor was offered a $1.00 contract, which was required so that she could be covered by UNICEF's evacuation order. She visited the City of Baidoa, hard hit by the second wave of famine in Somolia. With over one quarter of a million people dead, it was called "the City of Death." This, says Dr. Nutt, was not simply a medical failure. "Everywhere you went efforts were undermined by teenage boys who seized, raped or killed everything in their path," adding that it was even more than a political failure, it was a human rights failure.

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THE MANITOBA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

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The Rights Connection
by Jerry Woods, Chairperson

When considering a name for the 2012 CASHRA Conference, we decided on *"Are we there yet?"*, not because we think we are actually where we want to be in the evolution of human rights, but rather because this is a good question to re-assess how we are doing, to consider if change is taking longer than it should, or to realize that we have been delayed or even going backwards. I believe this conference addressed all these possibilities.

We know that human rights legislation will not, by itself, end discrimination. But it gives us the framework to fight for equality and understanding.

We have left the concept of tolerance behind and have travelled past the idea of acceptance. Our goal is now nothing short of inclusiveness.

Over the two day conference I heard many people from across the country, who reminded us of the strides made and the struggles ahead.

Past issues continue to haunt us – like harassment. New issues such as mental health challenge us. Future issues – social and economic rights and gender identity – reveal the work that is still ahead.

We must pause occasionally and reflect where we are today. We should celebrate successes and find strength in them. We must also recognize past failures and strive to correct them. And we will embrace today's challenges and continue to pursue the goal of freedom from discrimination.

In my opening remarks at the conference I posed some of the same questions asked by Martin Luther King that are associated with change. Is it safe? Is it politic? Is it popular? There are times when we must take the position that it isn't safe, it isn't politic and it isn't popular. It is however, right. Often this has been the road we travel while advancing human rights.

If we heed these words, we can succeed and in coming years we will be able to answer the question *"Are we there yet?"* with a glimpse of the destination.

I would like to acknowledge all who participated in this remarkable human rights conference, from speakers to participants to organizers. Thank you. Merci. Meegwich.

CASHRA Moments:

The CASHRA conference speakers made us think, laugh and brought tears to our eyes. Here are just a few of the things they said.

Elder Carl William Stone, from the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation reminded us of the vagaries of translation from his language. A closer translation is "*White animal breaking head through water* Ojibway Nation."

Barbara Hall referring to the GPS woman in her car (the female voice of the Global Positioning System) would advise her that that she was in Manitoba, in Winnipeg, and at the Forks. When it comes to human rights, however, she said she could almost hear the GPS woman saying, "No, you are not there yet. We still have a long way to go."

Dianna Evangeline Jansen talking about her sexual harassment case that went to the Supreme Court of Canada. "If I want to make money, I can make money – just give me a safe workplace."

Gerald Hashey, Senior Manager with the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission explaining why restorative justice is a better experience during conflict resolution. "Sometimes we get a positive legal outcome, but not a good personal experience."

Deidre Aldcorn speaking on *the Legal Update 2012 Plenary Panel:* "When it comes to hate, there could be a chilling effect in that people may be afraid to speak if the law is not clear." Deidre acted as co-counsel on behalf of the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission at the Supreme Court of Canada in *Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission v. William Whatcott, et al. in 2011.*

Debra Parkes, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of Manitoba speaking on the lack of resources given to human rights commissions to fight systemic complaints, referred to commissions as having to constantly put out bush fires, with little time or resources left to put out the incendiary fire of the whole forest.

Honourable Kevin Chief speaking with admiration of Dr. Lloyd Axworthy, President of the University of Winnipeg and former Minister of Foreign Affairs: "Dr. Axworthy has the ability to connect with many different people because his cultural IQ is so high."

Michael Champagne, "The story of the young Aboriginal Canadian is a story of displacement." Michael was born in the Shamattawa Cree Nation in Northern Manitoba and apprehended at birth. He is now twenty-five and has never been back to his birth community.

Aboriginal children's advocate and the Executive Director of First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada Cindy Blackstock repeated her message that First Nations children receive less; less for education, less for medical care and less child welfare support. "This is not a jurisdictional dispute. For them it is their race."

Cassie Palamar with the Alberta Human Rights Commission who spoke on the education panel responded to the *Are we there yet?* question, "Never. Education is ongoing."

The Honourable Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Manitoba Andrew Swan reflected on the distance travelled. "During Pride week, the Manitoba Legislative Building was lit up in rainbow colours, with the "Pride 25" logo appearing on the dome of the building, just beneath the Golden Boy. This is a very different world from what was seen and heard in 1987, when sexual orientation was first included as a protected ground from discrimination."

Communications Director Angela Cassie of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights lends a helping hand as CASHRA President Barbara Hall and CEO of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights sign a Memorandum of Understanding marking the beginning of a long-term relationship.

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She talked about the proliferation of arms in developing countries saying that 70% of the world's weapons are purchased by developing countries and that 90% of the sales are by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. She also spoke of Canada's role, stating that with the world drowning in weapons, Canada is among the top ten exporters of arms.

Dr. Nutt also spoke passionately about the plight of women in Congo and the horror of rape and mutilation and the silence they keep so that they will not be marginalized to a lifetime of poverty and isolation. She said to be wary of our technology tools. "Conflict is not that far removed from our daily lives but in fact is pretty much in everything we do." By way of example she drew a relationship between rape and the mining of coltan, a metallic ore used in cell phones, video games and computers. The closer one gets to the mines, she said, the higher the incidents of rape and the more extreme the violence.

Returning to the original question she said that we may forever move in a certain direction, but never really arrive. Her advice was to continue the journey by putting one foot in front of the other and carrying on.

Dr. Nutt's best-selling and critically acclaimed book, *Damned Nations: Greed, Guns, Armies and Aid*, was released on October 25, 2011. The book details Dr. Nutt's work over the course of fifteen years in some of the most devastated regions of the world.

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